DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 215 UD 033 857

AUTHOR	Vasallo, Philip
TITLE	More than Grades: How Choice Boosts Parental Involvement and Benefits Children. Policy Analysis, No. 383.
INSTITUTION	Cato Inst., Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-10-26
NOTE	18p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Cato Institute, 1000 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001 ($6; $3 each for five or more copies). Tel: 800-767-1241 (Toll Free); Fax: 202-842-3490. For full text: http://www.cato.org.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Participation; Satisfaction; *School Choice; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

A review of the research on school choice programs at city, state, and national levels indicates that choice schools support parents' involvement in their children's studies, encourage parents' participation in meaningful school activities, and engender greater satisfaction. Choice schools do so to a significantly greater degree than do traditional public schools. Parents of students in choice schools believe that the chosen school offers a greater measure of safety, discipline, and instructional quality than did their children's previous schools, and they are likely to reenroll their children in the choice program. Because the ultimate key to school reform is the parent, parents should become partners with educators to create the schools their children will need. State legislators should seek policies that return control of education to parents through mechanisms such as tax cuts and universal tuition tax credits. The adoption of such measures promises to increase parental involvement and bring other important benefits to children. (Contains 11 tables and 49 endnotes.) (SLD)

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ED 448 215

MORE THAN GRADES: HOW CHOICE BOOSTS PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND BENEFITS CHILDREN

Policy Analysis No. 383
October 26, 2000

Philip Vasallo

Cato Institute

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Policy Analysis

No. 383 October 26, 2000

More Than Grades

How Choice Boosts Parental Involvement and Benefits Children

by Philip Vassallo

Executive Summary

Research shows that parental involvement in a child's education is a strong predictor of student achievement: typically, the more involved the parent, the better off the child. Yet the current structure of the kindergarten through 12th-grade education system tends to marginalize parents. In most areas, government assigns children to particular schools, and school boards and bureaucrats control textbooks, curriculum, and other central aspects of a child's education.

Studies from school choice experiments suggest that school choice can be a powerful engine for parental involvement—choice by its nature engenders a higher level of parental participation than does the current system. Although a universal, customer-driven system has not been tried, sufficient research exists to prove that modified forms of choice—such as charter schools, vouchers, and private scholarship programs—increase parental involvement.

Although most studies of school choice experiments have focused on academic gains to children in choice programs, this study examines the many other benefits that choice programs bring to students. For example, parents of children in school choice programs (1) are more involved with their children's academic programs; (2) participate more in school activities; (3) believe that their chosen school offers a greater measure of safety, discipline, and instructional quality than did their previous school; (4) are more satisfied with their children's education in a choice program; and (5) are likely to reenroll their children in the choice program.

The ultimate key to school reform is the parent. Once parents assume the responsibility of advocating for and supporting their children's education, they will become partners with educators to create the schools their children need. State legislators should seek policies that return control of education to parents through mechanisms like tax cuts and universal tuition tax credits. The adoption of such measures promises to increase parental involvement and bring other important benefits to children.

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Recognizing the link between educational quality and parental involvement is long overdue.

Introduction

During the past 20 years, researchers have published dozens of studies documenting what common sense has long held: there is a clear link between parental involvement in a child's studies and student achievement.[1] However, the government-run system of K-12 schools has done little to put that important research into practice. In most areas, government still assigns children to particular schools, and school boards and bureaucrats control textbooks, curriculum, and other central aspects of a child's education. Perhaps for that reason, teachers, administrators, and education journalists have tended to view parents as little more than monitors for class trips, coordinators of cookie sales, and boosters for athletic events.

But times are changing. The importance of parents' beliefs about education, knowledge of their schools, aspirations for their children, and satisfaction with educational services is coming to the fore. Two examples, one from government and the other from an *Education Week* report, underscore the growing value placed on parental involvement in the education process.

The first example is "Goals 2000," a set of national education goals that emerged from the 1989 summit between President George Bush and the nation's governors. Of the six original goals resulting from that conference, not one discussed parental involvement. In 1994, however, the governors acknowledged that parents play an important role in shaping their children's education. That year the panel added another goal: "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children."[2]

The second example appears in "Quality Counts," the annual, oft-cited *Education Week* survey on the quality of education in each state. When the survey first appeared in 1997, the publishers stated that their principal goal was "to measure what really matters."[3] The survey had five broad categories: standards and assessment, school climate, resources, teaching quality, and student achievement. "Student/Parent Roles" constituted only 10 percent of the total grade in the school climate category, and teachers, not parents, were the source of information. By 1999 "Quality Counts" included more data on parental involvement, including the percentage of parents participating in open houses, back-to-school night, and parent-teacher conferences. Remarkably, the survey now also includes information on parental choice in schools—and the greater the choice, the higher the state's evaluation:

> States where students can choose to enroll in any school in the state received an A. States with limited public-school-choice policies—where students can choose from schools in their own district or where it is voluntary for districts to have local choice programs—received a C. States with no public school choice earned an F. States that allow charter schools earned an A; those that do not earned an F. States with strong charter school laws, as rated by the Center for Education Reform, earned an A; those with weak laws, an F. States that require or permit site-based management of schools and that grant waivers of education regulations earned an A. Those that do not received an F.[4]

Recognizing the link between educational quality and parental involvement is long overdue.[5] Charity schools of the mid-19th century and their common school successors—the equivalent of today's public schools—attempted to assimilate immigrant children by divorcing them from their family's foreign culture.[6] Once government schooling institutionalized education, the active role of parents in education diminished dramatically. Today it is fashionable to hold families responsible for cultivating their

children's educational and social progress; however, families have limited authority outside the home to fulfill that responsibility. The monopolistic practice of directing all public education funding to public schools has created not only a financial stranglehold on the public but a moral vacuum in society by weakening parental authority.[7] Choice frees parents from the shackles of bureaucratic controls and strengthens their capacity to participate in their children's education.

School choice programs are widely understood to include any or a combination of three models: charter schools, publicly financed vouchers, and private tuition scholarships. Although each of these models has adopted some elements of a market-based education system, results from these programs are imperfectly comparable with results that might occur under a fully private, competitive education system. Education scholar Myron Lieberman points out, for instance, that restrictions on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program will cause it "to turn out poorly precisely because it is not a competitive market system of education."[8] Programs vary widely in terms of whether they are publicly or privately financed, whether participation is based on income, whether they cap the total number of participants, whether children of all ages can participate, and whether religious schools can participate. Nevertheless, these programs provide important information for policymakers about the kinds of schools parents seek for their children and some of the benefits that greater choice among schools is bringing to children.

Of the various school choice programs enrolling more than 100,000 students nationwide, those programs selected in Table 1 are the focus of this analysis. Examined are results from studies by Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the Cleveland Scholarship Program, the CEO Horizon Scholarship Program in San Antonio, Texas, the New York School Choice Scholarships Program, and the Washington Scholarship Fund. This analysis also draws on annual reports commissioned by the state of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau on the Milwaukee program. Also included is an examination of results from citywide and statewide studies of charter school programs.[9]

None of those studies focuses solely or comprehensively on parental participation and satisfaction. However, they collectively offer to educators, parents, and taxpayers the best picture available of whether choice initiatives in various forms deliver what parents want for their children. Taken together, these reports submit clear evidence that parents' positive beliefs about school choice, their support of school choice programs, and their ultimate satisfaction with them are sufficient to make choice an imperative in every state.

Choice Engenders Parental Involvement

Parents of children in choice programs have been found to be more involved with their children's academic programs and extracurricular activities than are other groups of parents with whom they have been compared.

For instance, compared with Milwaukee's low-income parents and parents from Milwaukee's general population, parents with children participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (1) read with or to their children 10 to 15 percent more often, (2) worked with their children on math homework 5 to 10 percent more often, (3) worked with their children on writing or penmanship 10 to 20 percent more often, (4) watched an educational television program with their children 5 to 10 percent more often, and (5) participated with their children in a sports activity up to 10 percent more often.[10]

Similar findings were reported in a study on the San Antonio Horizon Scholarship Program. Compared with parents with children in public schools, parents participating in the program were found to work with their children on homework 22 percent more often and on non-homework-related math and reading lessons 15 percent more often.[11]

The monopolistic practice of directing all public education funding to public schools has created not only a financial stranglehold on the public but a moral vacuum in society by weakening parental authority.

Table 1
Enrollment in Select Choice Programs

Choice Program	District Students	Choice Students	Choice as Percentage of District
Cleveland Scholarship Program (publicly funded)	76,000	3,674	4.8%
Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (publicly funded)	95,000	7,996	8.4%
New York School Choice Scholarships Program (privately funded)	1,000,000	1,300	0.1%
CEO Horizon Scholarship Program, Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio (privately funded)	15,477	837	5.4%
Washington Scholarship Fund (privately funded)	85,000	460	0.5%
Dayton PACE Program (publicly funded)	25,000	530	2.1%

Source: Author's compilation

Choice frees parents from the shackles of bureaucratic controls and strengthens their capacity to participate in their children's education.

However, studies by the Program on Education Policy and Governance of the Cleveland Scholarship Program, the New York School Choice Scholarships Program, the Washington Scholarship Fund, and the Dayton PACE Program showed no statistically significant indicators that parents of scholarship recipients were more involved in their children's education than were their respective control group. Regardless of the reasons for variation across participation rates, it is clear that, with regard to their children's academic programs, parents who participate in choice programs are at least as involved as, and often more involved than, parents are generally.

Studies of choice programs also indicate that parents with children in choice programs communicate more frequently with school officials and take part more often in school activities than do nonparticipating parents. Table 2 shows that school officials participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program tend to communicate more frequently with parents about student performance and behavior than do school officials in nonparticipating schools. Participating schools also invite more parent participation in school activities and fundraising efforts than do nonparticipating schools.

Parental participation can also be measured by examining the number of times parents initiate contact with the school. By that standard, Milwaukee's choice parents were overwhelmingly more involved with their children's school experiences than were other Milwaukee parents. Choice parents initiated communication with their schools more frequently than did any Milwaukee group with whom they were compared. They (1) inquired more about their student's performance by 10 to 20 percent, (2) inquired more about their student's classes by 10 percent, (3) inquired more about school information by 10 to 15 percent, (4) were 20 percent more likely to help in the classroom, (5) were 15 to 20 percent more likely to do volunteer work for their school, and (6) were 15 to 20 percent more likely to take part in parent-teacher organization activities.[12]

Similarly, results from the San Antonio CEO Horizon Program show that parents with children in choice schools participated more often in school activities than did Edgewood public school parents (Table 3).[13]

Table 2
Annual Frequency with Which Milwaukee Schools Contact Parents

Reason for Contact	Number of Contacts					
	Choice Parents			Control Parents		
	0	1–2	3+	0	1–2	3+
Child's academic performance[a]	40	33	27	49	30	21
Child's behavior[a]	40	28	32	48	29	23
School volunteer work[a]	55	23	22	64	23	13
Fundraising[a]	44	33	22	60	28	12

Source: John Witte et al., *Fourth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Madison: Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin, December 1994).
[a]Percentage.

The vast majority of studies on charter schools also show remarkably high levels of parental participation. One study by the Clayton Foundation of 24 Colorado charter schools serving 4,532 students found that parental input "is extraordinary"[14] and that parent leadership was crucial to the creation and the continued operation of most of the charter schools.[15] Another study of 111 California charter schools by SRI International reported that 88 percent of all California charter schools had parents on their governing bodies, 88 percent of parents attended parent-teacher conferences, and 40 percent assumed instructional roles.[16] In addition, 75 percent of the charter schools required parents to sign contracts in which parental involvement was stipulated.[17] The report concluded, "Parent participation was often very extensive in charter schools."[18]

Similarly, a 1998 study of Los Angeles charter schools by WestEd reported that many charter schools have parental involvement contracts to reinforce parental accountability for student conduct and that "most schools reported having a higher degree of parent involvement since becoming a charter school."[19] The report notes that parental involvement goes beyond traditional fundraising activities to include, for example, serving on decisionmaking committees. Teachers in these charter schools, too, have observed that parents influence many areas of school policy, including curriculum development and discipline.[20]

Studies on publicly supported choice programs, privately sponsored choice programs, and charter schools show that choice engenders greater parental involvement in children's academic programs and other school activities. School choice programs demonstrate that parents in choice programs are more likely to be involved in their children's education on both the home and school fronts. They monitor their children's work and help them more often, and they get more involved with their children's school than do parents with whom they are compared. Parents in choice programs become empowered in their critical role of supporting their children's education.

What Parents Want from Schools

An examination of findings from San Antonio's CEO Horizon Program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and the Washington Scholarship Fund shows that parents participating in school choice programs overwhelmingly define educational excellence

Parents of children in choice programs have been found to be more involved with their children's academic programs than are other groups of parents.

Table 3
Parental Participation in the San Antonio Scholarship Program (percentage)

Parental Participation Indicator	Choice Parents	Edgewood Public School Parents
Attended a school activity in the past month	60	38
Volunteered at child's school in the past month	39	10
Attended parent-teacher conference in the past year	81	65

Source: Paul Peterson, David Myers, and William Howell, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year* (Washington: Mathematica Policy Research; Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, September 1999)

in terms of three things: safety, discipline, and instructional quality.

Parents of the CEO Horizon Program in San Antonio, Texas, were asked what factors they considered in choosing their child's school. Parents cited the following factors as "very important": (1) what is taught in class, 89 percent; (2) teacher quality, 82 percent; (3) discipline, 81 percent; (4) safety, 73 percent; and (5) academic quality, 77 percent.[21] Points 1, 2, and 5, of course, are all elements of instructional quality.

The University of Wisconsin survey of parents participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program contains similar findings. Parents were asked to rate "issues and their importance in your decision to participate in the Choice program." The top four factors ranked as "very important" among choice program applicants were (1) educational quality, 88 percent; (2) teaching approach or style, 85 percent; (3) discipline, 76 percent; and (4) general atmosphere, 74 percent.[22]

Applicants for the Washington Scholarship Fund, too, gave similar reasons for seeking a new school. Parents rated the following reasons as "important": (1) higher standards, 80 percent; (2) better curriculum, 78 percent; (3) better teachers, 55 percent; and (4) safer school, 45 percent.[23]

The State of Charter Schools, 2000: Fourth-Year Report, a Department of Education report of 428 charter schools, did not provide information on parents' reasons for choosing charter schools; however, it did note reasons why parents and students might be attracted to charter schools.[24] Charter school officials were asked, "How powerful is [a given feature] in attracting parents and students to your school?" Table 4 shows parents' responses on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being least powerful and 5 being most powerful. Once again, safety, discipline, and instructional quality appear prominently.

Parents participating in school choice programs overwhelmingly define educational excellence in terms of three things: safety, discipline, and instructional quality.

Parental Satisfaction

Parents have made it clear that they have three priorities for their children's school: safety, discipline, and instructional quality. Surveys also make it clear that parents of children in choice programs believe their public schools are less able to meet those demands than are their schools of choice.

Applicants to the New York School Choice Scholarships Program had a relatively low opinion of their public schools' ability to provide safety, discipline, and quality instruction. Only 14 percent reported being "very satisfied" with school safety, 18 percent with student respect for teachers, and 14 percent with teaching. Similarly, applicants to the Cleveland Scholarship Program gave low marks to their public schools: 25 percent were "very satisfied" with school safety, 24 percent with school discipline, and 28 percent with the academic program.

Dissatisfaction with prior schooling also appears to be higher among applicants whose children were enrolled in public

Table 4
Qualities Cited as Most Important by Parents

Feature	Order of Importance	Parental Response (percentage rating 4 or 5)
Nurturing environment	1	93
Safe environment	2	90
Value system	3	88
Quality of academic program	4	84
High standards for achievement	5	83
Small class size	6	83
Specialized curriculum focus	7	78

Source: Paul Berman et al., *A National Study of Charter Schools: Second-Year Report* (Washington: RPP International, July 1999).

schools than among parents whose children were enrolled in private schools. For instance, among parents of children in the San Antonio CEO Horizon Program, 50 percent of respondents whose children had previously attended public school gave their former school a grade of C or lower, while only 13 percent of parents whose children were previously enrolled in private school did so. Surveys of participants in the Washington Scholarship Fund Program show similar findings (Table 5).

Surveys of parents whose children are in choice programs show that parents are dissatisfied with the educational quality offered in their public schools. The question then becomes, Are the schools of choice responding to and meetings parents' demands?

Across the board, studies from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Cleveland Scholarship Program, New York School Choice Scholarships Program, Washington Scholarship Fund, Dayton PACE Program, and San Antonio CEO Horizon Scholarship Program indicate that parents are much more satisfied with their new schools than they were with their previous schools.

Consider findings from the longest-running choice program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. During the program's first four years, 1990–94, Milwaukee's choice parents reported being pleased with the way the program was administered. Between 63 and 77 percent of participants said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with various factors ranging from the availability of information about the program and the school of their choice to the support they received from the school and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.[25]

Choice parents also assigned their new schools considerably higher grades in general than they assigned to their previous public schools. From 1990 to 1995, in any given year, choice parents gave their previous public schools grades of A or B at a rate of 51 percent, whereas they gave their choice schools grades of A or B at an average rate of 73 percent.[26] Grade point averages were also appreciably higher for choice schools: the grade point average assigned to prior public schools was 2.4, whereas the grade point average given to choice schools was 3.0 over the same period.[27]

The *Fifth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* concludes: "Parental attitudes toward choice schools, opinions of the choice program, and parental involvement were very positive over the first five years. Attitudes toward choice schools and the education of their children were much more positive than

Across the board, studies indicate that parents are much more satisfied with their new schools than they were with their previous schools.

Table 5
Parents' Assessment of the Washington Scholarship Fund Program

Grade	D.C. Low-Income Applicants from Public School (percentage)	D.C. Low-Income Applicants from Private School (percentage)
A	18	59
B	42	30
C	31	10
D	7	1
F	2	0

Source: Paul Peterson et al., *Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in Washington, D.C.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, September 1, 1998).

In any given year, choice parents gave their previous public schools grades of A or B at a rate of 51 percent but gave their choice schools grades of A or B at an average rate of 73 percent.

their evaluations of their prior public schools.[28] Tables 6 and 7 show satisfaction indicators for Milwaukee's choice parents.

Not surprisingly, parents with children in the Cleveland Scholarship Program, too, had a much higher opinion of their child's school than did nonparticipating public school parents of their child's school. Cleveland Program parents were more likely to believe that their schools had strict rules of conduct, high academic standards, a cooperative group of parents working on the school's behalf, teachers who helped all the students, and excellent teaching. On some issues, such as school location, public schools fared almost as well as schools of choice, but in no case did public schools fare better.[29]

Compared with public school parents, Cleveland scholarship parents consistently saw less vandalism, absenteeism, fighting, and racial conflict at their child's school. In every category listed, including school facility, safety, class size, parental involvement, discipline, student respect for teachers, teaching of moral values, academic program, and teacher skills, Cleveland choice parents outnumbered public school parents in being "very satisfied" with their child's education.[30] Tables 8 and 9 highlight those data.

The New York School Choice Scholarships Program shows even higher levels of parental satisfaction. Scholarship users were compared with a control group that was offered but did not apply for or accept the scholarship. Scholarship parents reported that their children were in smaller classes and in smaller schools, there were fewer problems with the new schools, their child was asked to do more homework, and the parents enjoyed more communication with the school.[31] In addition, as shown in Table 10, more scholarship parents than control group parents reported being "very satisfied" on a broad range of measures, including school facility, safety, class size, parental involvement, discipline, student respect for teachers, teaching values, academic quality, and teaching.[32]

The Program on Education Policy and Governance looked at parental satisfaction from a different angle for its *Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in Washington D.C. and Dayton, Ohio*, mainly because those findings are preliminary reports and reliable information on satisfaction with the choice program was unavailable. The authors compared applicants who had children in private schools with applicants who had children in public schools. The authors concluded, "Public school parents are applying because they want to leave their current school, whereas private school parents are applying precisely because they want to stay."[33] This point is significant because it suggests that, if given the opportunity, parents will choose the school they believe is best for their child, whether that choice entails remaining in their current school or opting for a new school they believe will better meet their child's needs.

Table 6
Parental Satisfaction with Milwaukee Choice Program, 1990–93 (percentage)

Factor	Satisfaction
Amount of information on the choice program	76
Accuracy of information on the choice program	75
Amount of information on the private schools	67
Accuracy of information on the private schools	70
Assistance from school to which parent applied	77
Assistance from Department of Public Instruction in Madison	63

Source: John Witte et al., *Fourth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Madison: Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin, December 1994).

Table 7
Parental Satisfaction with Milwaukee Choice Program, 1991–94 (percentage)

Grade	1991	1992	1993	1994
A	40	33	30	42
B	37	39	36	33
C	14	22	21	18
D	3	3	10	6
F	5	2	4	2

Source: John Witte et al., *Fourth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Madison: Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin, December 1994).

For instance, applicants to the Washington Scholarship Fund who had children in private schools reported being "very satisfied" with various aspects of their school in greater numbers than did applicants with children in public schools. As Table 10 shows, measures included school facility, safety, class size, parental involvement, discipline, respect for teachers, teaching of moral values, academic program, and teacher skills. Furthermore, 89 percent of private school scholarship parents gave their child's school an A or a B for how well it taught compared with only 60 percent of public school parents.[34]

The Dayton PACE Program shows similar results. Private school choice parents yielded much higher percentages of "very satisfied" than did public school parents in the following areas: school facility, safety, class size, parental involvement, discipline, respect for teachers, teaching of moral values, academic program, and teacher skills. Private school scholarship parents gave the teaching quality of their child's school a grade of A or B at a 90 percent rate compared with a 55 percent rate among public school parents (Table 10).[35]

Nowhere is information on parental satisfaction as telling as it is in San Antonio, where the CEO Horizon Program offers equal choice to all low-income families across the Edgewood district. In a joint study by Mathematica Policy Research and the Program on Education Policy and Governance, parents in the CEO Horizon Program were compared with a cross section of parents in the Edgewood district. Again, parental satisfaction is far greater among parents in the choice program. Horizon parents gave more "very satisfied" responses than did Edgewood public school parents in the following areas:

Choice parents outnumbered public school parents in being "very satisfied" with their child's education.

Table 8
Cleveland Parents' Assessment of Problems with Current School (percentage)

Problem	Scholarship Parents	Public School Parents
Vandalism	3	14
Absenteeism	5	24
Fighting	13	27
Racial conflict	5	10

Source: Paul Peterson, William Howell, and Jay Greene, *An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program after Two Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, June 1999).

Table 9
Cleveland Parents' Satisfaction with Current School (percentage "very satisfied")

Category	Scholarship Parents	Public School Parents
School facility	33	19
Safety	49	31
Class size	37	15
Parental involvement	38	29
Discipline	48	25
Student respect for teachers	45	24
Teaching of moral values	55	30
Academic program	47	29
Teacher skills	49	39

Source: Paul Peterson, William Howell, and Jay Greene, *An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program after Two Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, June 1999).

Private school scholarship parents gave the teaching quality of their child's school a grade of A or B at a 90 percent rate compared with a 55 percent rate among public school parents.

school facility, safety, class size, parental involvement, discipline, respect for teachers, teaching of moral values, academic program, and teacher skills. Horizon parents gave their schools an overall grade of A or B at an 86 percent rate compared with a 73 percent rate among public school parents (Table 11).[36]

The charter school movement also appears to be a catalyst for parental satisfaction. In *Charter Schools in Action, Final Report*, which examined 30 charter schools in 9 states, the Hudson Institute found that parents believed their children were performing better as charter school students, and it also concluded that parental satisfaction ran deep across a host of educational indicators. For instance, more than two-thirds of charter parents were "very satisfied" with opportunities for parental participation (76 percent), class size (75 percent), curriculum (72 percent), school size (75 percent), individual attention by teacher (71 percent), and academic standards (68 percent). When asked to compare their charter school with the school their child would have otherwise attended, parents overwhelmingly favored the charter experience. Most parents reported that their charter school was superior to the public school across several significant indicators: 67 percent for individual attention by teacher, 70 percent for class size, 69 percent for school size, 66 percent for quality of teaching, 64 percent for parent involvement, and 65 percent for curriculum.[37] It is also important to note that parents with children with special needs were far more satisfied

Table 10
Satisfaction Rates among Applicants to Select Choice Programs (percentage "very satisfied")

Category	Washington		Dayton		New York City	
	Private School Parents	Public School Parents	Private School Parents	Public School Parents	Private School Parents	Public School Parents
School facility	48	15	49	15	42	36
Safety	66	25	62	23	57	49
Class size	54	15	53	13	42	36
Parental involvement	67	38	67	28	40	35
Discipline	64	20	62	15	59	50
Respect for teachers	63	28	60	17	58	50
Teaching of values	70	21	68	15	55	47
Academic program	63	20	62	15	54	46
Teacher skills	64	24	62	19	63	54
Grade of A or B for how well children are taught	89	60	90	55	56[a]	54[a]

Sources: Paul Peterson et al., *Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in Washington, D.C. and Dayton, Ohio* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, October 1998); and Paul Peterson, David Myers, and William Howell, *An Evaluation of the New York City School Choice Scholarships Program: The First Year* (Washington: Mathematica Policy Research; Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, October 1998).

[a]Grade A only.

with their charter school experience than with their previous schools (Table 12).

Similarly, *The Colorado Charter Schools Evaluation Study*, commissioned by the Colorado Board of Education, showed that all of the 10 charter schools returning information on parental satisfaction reported satisfaction levels of 78 to 99 percent, with 7 at 90 percent or higher.[38] Reports on California charter schools make similar conclusions. *The Cross-Site Report: The Findings and Implications of Increased Flexibility and Accountability* by WestEd notes:

> Parents report high levels of satisfaction with the charter schools up for renewal. In these five schools, 96 percent of all the parents said that they were satisfied or very satisfied. In fact, two-thirds reported being very satisfied. . . . Most parents were satisfied with nearly all of the aspects of the school listed, including: The mission of the school, the way the school is governed, the teachers and administrators at the school, and their child's progress at the school.[39]

Thus, just as charter schools take root and are sustained by high levels of parental participation, so too does parental satisfaction with the schools increase. Presumably, this cycle of parental participation and satisfaction emerges from parents' contributing more substantially to their children's education.

Waiting lists are also used as a proxy for parental satisfaction. According to the *Evaluation of Charter School Effectiveness* by SRI International: "Many California charter schools have achieved considerable success in

Parents with children with special needs were far more satisfied with their charter schools than with their previous schools.

Table 11
Parental Satisfaction with the San Antonio CEO Horizon Scholarship Program (percentage "very satisfied")

Category	CEO Horizon Parents	Edgewood Parents
School facility	39	28
Safety	60	38
Class size	43	19
Parental involvement	43	31
Discipline	62	39
Respect for teachers	60	39
Teaching of moral values	62	38
Academic program	61	35
Teacher skills	63	47
Grade of A or B for how well children are taught	86	73

Source: Paul Peterson, David Myers, and William Howell, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year* (Washington: Mathematica Policy Research, Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, September 1999).

How does any business know that it is doing well? By repeat business.

the eyes of parents . . . 63 percent of schools reported having wait lists for entrance into their schools, and an additional 69 percent expected to increase enrollment in the coming year."[40] *The State of Charter Schools 2000: Fourth-Year Report*, the national study by the U.S. Department of Education, corroborates those claims. Nationally, 70 percent of charter schools report waiting lists—a number virtually unchanged over a two-year period.[41] In fact, voucher programs also have waiting lists, implying a considerable demand for schools of choice over available public schools.[42]

Across the board, studies from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Cleveland Scholarship Program, New York School Choice Scholarships Program, Washington Scholarship Fund, Dayton PACE Program, and San Antonio CEO Horizon Scholarship Program, and research on charter schools, indicate that parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with their new schools and are more satisfied with their new schools than they were with their previous schools on a range of measures, including safety, class size, discipline, respect for teachers, teacher skills, school facilities, and instructional quality.

Student Retention

How does any business know that it is doing well? By repeat business. However, in the case of school programs, the immediate reaction to look to attendance and retention rates as an indicator of success must be tempered by an understanding that groups who have been served in choice programs traditionally possess high mobility rates.

Because the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has been in existence for a decade, it offers the best opportunity to examine attrition statistics. A recent evaluation of the Milwaukee program by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau acknowledges that measuring pupil mobility data is difficult, mainly because comparable control groups within the district are difficult to determine. However, the study concludes, "Available data indicate that most participating [choice] schools experienced relatively few pupil departures during the school year."[43] In a survey that studied all 86 participating voucher schools in Milwaukee from September 1998 to January 1999, the Legislative Audit Bureau found that no students left 23 of the schools

Table 12
Parental Satisfaction with Special Needs (percentage "excellent" or "above average")

Category	Previous School	Charter School	Change
Special education	17	38	+ 21
Gifted	60	78	+ 18
Limited English proficiency	43	63	+ 20
Total[a]	34	57	+ 23

Source: Gregg Vanourek et al., *Charter Schools in Action, Final Report* (Washington: Hudson Institute, June 1997).

[a]Total average across all indicators.

during the school year and that the departure rate was only 6 percent among 83 of the schools. Of the three schools with a much higher mobility rate of more than 25 percent, one was for at-risk teenaged parents and had a dropout rate that was significantly higher than those of other schools.[44]

Students participating in the New York School Choice Scholarships Program and their control group counterparts had virtually the same low mobility rate during the school year of approximately 5 percent. However, the study on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program found that choice students "are more likely to attend the same school next year than are the members of the control group" by more than 10 percent.[45]

The San Antonio program also shows statistically significant, higher retention rates among choice students than public school students. Of the total enrollment, 93 percent of Horizon students attended the same school from the beginning of the year compared with 84 percent of public school students. In addition, 90 percent of Horizon students plan on attending the same school next year compared with 79 percent of public school students.[46]

The Cleveland Scholarship Program, the Washington Scholarship Fund, and the Dayton PACE Program all had excellent school year student retention figures, as did the groups with which the were compared, though none of the differences were statistically significant.[47] Taken together, the studies show that choice schools tend to have student retention rates that are at least equal to and often significantly higher than those of nonchoice schools. This suggests that schools of choice tend to satisfy parents and students better than do nonchoice schools.

Reenrollment rates in charter schools are similarly positive. The Clayton Foundation and SRI International reports on charter schools in Colorado and California describe parents "voting with their feet," suggesting that parents express their support for the charter school experience by either reenrolling their children in the school or removing them from it.[48] The Hudson Institute's national study of charter schools found that 79 percent of parents with children in charter schools intend to keep their children in those schools.[49]

The statistical evidence supporting the idea that choice initiatives increase parental satisfaction and student retention seems indisputable. One report echoes the preceding one in stating that, if given a choice, parents will exercise it prudently, particularly mindful of safety, discipline, and academic quality. More than anything else, the facts suggest that parents prefer choice, and exercise it, once they have the option. In doing so, they become more pleased with their children's education.

Conclusion

Studies of school choice programs on city, state, and national levels indicate that choice schools support parents' involvement in their

Studies show that choice schools often have significantly higher student retention rates than do nonchoice schools.

If given a choice, parents will exercise it prudently, particularly mindful of safety, discipline, and academic quality.

children's studies, encourage parents' participation in meaningful school activities, and engender greater satisfaction—and that choice schools do so to a significantly greater degree than do traditional public schools.

Choice works by its very nature because, when parents have a choice, they take more responsibility for their decisions and have a greater stake in the success of their children's school. Although a universal, market system has yet to be launched, sufficient research exists to prove that modified forms of choice—such as charter schools, vouchers, and private scholarship programs—increase parental involvement and satisfaction.

Compared with public school parents, parents of children in choice programs (1) monitor their children's work and help them more often; (2) get more involved with their children's school; (3) seek and find environments that offer their children safety, discipline, and better instructional quality; (4) are more satisfied with their children's new schools than they were with their previous schools across a wide range of indicators; and (5) are likely to reenroll their children in their schools of choice.

Parental involvement is the key to educational excellence so critical to children's futures. Once empowered to assume the full measure of their responsibility to support their children's education, parents will become partners with educators in creating and maintaining the schools their children need. The importance of parents is now squarely at the forefront of education reform. State legislators should seek policies that return control of education to parents through mechanisms like tax cuts and universal tuition tax credits. The adoption of such measures promises to transform American schooling by increasing parental involvement and providing for children the education they deserve.

Notes

1. That body of research includes Nancy Chavkin, ed., *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society* (Albany, N.Y.: State University Press, 1993); Jacquelynne Eccles and Rena Harold, "Parent-School Involvement during the Early Adolescent Years," *Teachers College Record* 94, no. 3 (1993): 568–87; and Luis Laosa, "School, Occupation, Culture, and Family: The Impact of Parental Schooling in the Parent-Child Relationship," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 74, no. 4 (1982): 791–827.

2. National Education Goals Panel, *1994 National Education Goals Report* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994).

3. "Quality Counts," *Teacher Magazine*, February 1997, p. 20.

4. Craig Jerald, "Quality Counts: How We Graded the States," *Education Week* 19, no. 18 (February 2000): 84.

5. Among publications that urge greater parental involvement as a means of improving student performance are Norm Fructer, Anne Galletta, and J. Lynne White, *New Directions in Parent Involvement* (Washington: Academy for Educational Development, 1992); Seyong Lee, "Family-School Connections and Students' Education: Continuity and Change of Family Involvement from the Middle Grades to High School" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1994); and U.S. Department of Education, *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning* (Washington: DOE, September 1994).

6. Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 55.

7. Quentin Quade, "School Choice and Parental Freedom: A Challenge to All Catholics," Blum Center for Parental Freedom in Education, 1998, www.marquette.edu/blum/index.htm.

8. Myron Lieberman, *Public Education: An Autopsy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 13.

9. See, for instance, Clayton Foundation, *The 1997 Colorado Charter Schools Evaluation Study: The Characteristics, Status, and Student Achievement of Colorado Charter Schools* (Denver, Colo.: Clayton Foundation, 1997); J. Izu et al., *Cross-Site Report: The Findings and Implications of Increased Flexibility and Accountability: An Evaluation of Charter Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District* (San Francisco: WestEd, August 1998); and Judith Powell et al., *Evaluation of Charter School Effectiveness* (Menlo Park, Calif.: SRI International, December 11, 1997).

10. John Witte et al., *Fourth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Madison: Robert M.

LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin, December 1994), Appendix 9.

11. Paul Peterson, David Myers, and William Howell, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year* (Washington: Mathematica Policy Research, Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, September 1999), p. 49.

12. Witte et al.

13. Ibid., p. 26.

14. Clayton Foundation, p. 22.

15. Ibid., p. 26.

16. Activities included assisting teachers in the classroom, organizing field trips, staffing the library, evaluating the school's instructional program, and teaching in-home study for the independent study program.

17. Powell et al., p. II-9.

18. Ibid., p. VI-3.

19. Izu et al., p. 15.

20. Ibid., pp. 20-21.

21. Peterson, Myers, and Howell, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District*, p. 41.

22. Witte et al., Appendix, Table 4.

23. Paul Peterson et al., *Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in Washington, D.C.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, September 1, 1998).

24. Paul Berman et al., *A National Study of Charter Schools: Second-Year Report* (Washington: RPP International, July 1999), p. 84.

25. Witte et al., Appendix, Table 3.

26. Grades of A and B for choice schools were 78 percent in 1991, 72 percent in 1992, 65 percent in 1993, and 75 percent in 1994.

27. The GPAs for choice schools were 3.04 in 1991, 2.89 in 1992, 2.78 in 1993, and 3.07 in 1994.

28. John Witte, Troy Sterr, and Christopher Thorn, *Fifth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Madison: Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin, December 1995), p. 10.

29. Paul Peterson, William Howell, and Jay Greene, *An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program after Two Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, June 1999), pp. 16-21.

30. Ibid.

31. Paul Peterson, David Myers, and William Howell, *An Evaluation of the New York City School Choice Scholarships Program: The First Year* (Washington: Mathematica Policy Research; Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, October 1998), p. 2.

32. Ibid., p. 44.

33. Paul Peterson et al., *Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in Washington, D.C. and Dayton, Ohio* (Cambridge, Mass.: Program on Education Policy and Governance, October 1998), p. 17.

34. Ibid., p. 46.

35. Ibid., p. 47.

36. Peterson, Myers, and Howell, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District*, p. 52.

37. Gregg Vanourek et al., *Charter Schools in Action, Final Report* (Washington: Hudson Institute, June 1997), p. I-4.

38. Clayton Foundation, pp. 38-85.

39. Izu et al., p. 49.

40. Powell et al., p. V-4.

41. Beryl Nelson et al., *The State of Charter Schools, 2000: Fourth-Year Report* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2000), p. 9.

42. Isabel Sawhill and Shannon Smith, *Vouchers for Elementary and Secondary Education* (Washington: Brookings Institution, August 1998), p. 28.

43. Legislative Audit Bureau, *An Evaluation: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Madison, Wis.: Legislative Audit Bureau, February 2000), p. 43.

44. Ibid., p. 44.

45. Peterson, Myers, and Howell, *An Evaluation of the New York City School Choice Scholarships Program*, p. 21.

46. Peterson, Myers, and Howell, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District*, p. 56.

47. Cleveland scholarship students had a 92 percent retention rate, the public school students with whom they were compared had a retention rate of 96 percent. Washington Scholarship Fund students remained in school throughout the year at a 92 percent rate compared with a 90 percent rate for children who were not offered a scholarship. Dayton PACE students maintained a 92 percent retention rate compared with a 93 percent retention rate for similar students who were not offered scholarships.

48. Clayton Foundation, p. 6; and Powell et al., p. S8.

49. Vanourek et al., p. I-8.

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